

# Harmony and Disharmony in the Anthracite Coal Fields, 1872-1876

By S. Robert Powell, Ph.D.

With the strike of 1870-1871 over, coal shipments to Honesdale were resumed in early June 1871. Coal tonnage amounts, however, were down almost 1,000,000 tons from the production amounts for the previous year.

**Knights of Labor:** As early as 1871, the Knights of Labor, founded by Uriah Stephens on December 28, 1869, was active in the anthracite fields of northeastern Pennsylvania. The KOL, the first mass organization of the white working class of the United States, was organized in Philadelphia as a secret organization. In 1878, it went public. Under the leadership of Terence Powderly, a machinist by trade, the KOL accepted members of the 'producing classes' regardless of occupation, nationality, race, religion, or sex. Explicitly barred from membership were bankers, stockbrokers, lawyers, liquor dealers, and gamblers.

The Knights of Labor promoted the social and cultural uplift of the worker, and demanded, if you please, the eight-hour day. The members of the KOL were largely Irish. The English, Welsh, and German miners did not want to belong to the same union as the Irish. Maintaining and celebrating one's ethnic identity was a major concern, then as now, in the anthracite coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania. But there was a job to be done, and there were managers and there were laborers, and there was a commodity to be mined and shipped to market, and working effectively (in harmony) with others, regardless of their nationality, was mandatory.

**The Work Environment:** During June, July, and August 1872, the Cold Brook mines in Carbondale were idle. (Language note: In later years, these "Cold" Brook mines were popularly—and erroneously--called "Coal" Brook mines; a "Coal" Brook Breaker was also constructed in the Carbondale yard.) In June 1872, in addition, the Lackawanna Breaker was also not working. As such, nearly one half of the miners in Carbondale, as well as many outside hands, were out of employment. Work at one of the Olyphant shafts was also suspended. In early November 1872, it was reported in the *Carbondale Leader* that the D&H had orders for two months ahead. On account of not having a sufficient number of cars and locomotives, the D&H was unable to fill their orders as fast as they came. A large number of the men and boys, who were out of employment in the mines, found work in other places and on the farms for miles around, where they got fair wages for their work. The mechanics were not forced to lie idle at that time, and the Gravity road ran as usual to convey coal from mines down the valley to Honesdale.

Volatile economic conditions prevailed as well following the American Civil War. An economic surge set off a wave of speculation the likes of which America had never seen. The government was corrupt, and fraudulent business dealings were commonplace. Americans fell deeper into debt, as more and more capital was transferred from production to speculation.

**Panic of 1873:** On September 17, 1873, the banking house of Jay Cooke collapsed, and the New York Stock Exchange closed its doors for ten days. The United States slid into a depression. Five thousand commercial houses failed in 1873; 5,830 in 1874; 7,740 in 1875; 9,092 in 1876; almost 9,000 in 1877; and 10,478 in 1878. Factories closed and thousands lost their jobs. Nearly three

hundred of approximately seven hundred iron and steel plants in America closed down. Of the country's 364 railroads, 89 went into the hands of receivers and the building of new mileage was largely suspended, throwing a half million laborers out of work. Working conditions and wages for anthracite miners worsened.

Beginning in July 1873, it was announced in the *Carbondale Leader* of June 28, 1873, that all the mines throughout the valley would be worked on three-quarter time. In addition, shipments of coal by the D&H and the DL&W, among others, would be reduced by one-fourth. On Monday, July 14, 1873, the miners employed by the D. & H. C. Co. at their mines in the vicinity of Carbondale were paid their monthly wages. In October 1873, the D&H discharged more than 30 men who worked in the Gravity shops and reduced the wages of those retained by ten percent. In mid-October 1873, as well, a number of men who worked on the Gravity Railroad were also discharged. By early November 1873, the D&H was working three-quarter time at some points in their operations.

**The Lease Question: 1873-1874:** In December 1873, the D&H asked the miners and others working for the Company to sign leases to the D&H-owned lots on which their houses were standing and which many of them had occupied for years. If they did not do so, said the D&H, they could not work for the D&H any longer. After some back and forth on the question—and thanks, in a large measure, to the enlightened managerial style of Thomas Dickson--the lease problem, to the complete satisfaction of all concerned, was solved, and harmony restored in the coal fields. On Monday, January 12, the miners, some of whom had signed leases, began going to work again. See our article on this question (“The Lease Question, 1873-1874”, *BLHS Bulletin*, February 2023, pp. 15-18).

**Entangling Alliances:** As we look at the working relationship between D&H management and D&H employees in post-Civil War America, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of these employer/employee actions were prompted by economic hard times in general and as a response to the laws of supply and demand. At the same time, the relationship between D&H and its vast network of employees remained positive, with both groups knowing that in the production/marketing enterprise in which they were both players, both management and labor had to win.

The autonomy of the D&H—and the carefully established on-the-job harmony in the coal fields among the multitude of managers and laborers—were both compromised when, in post-Civil War America, the D&H lost its autonomy and was drawn into alliances with the other primary coal corporations in the anthracite coal fields.

In 1874, with a strike impending of the miners throughout the anthracite coal fields, representatives from the principal coal corporations in northeastern Pennsylvania met in the office of the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company in New York on January 7, 1874, to discuss tonnage allotments.

**Molly Maguire Violence: 1873-1874:** Harmony/law and order in the anthracite coal fields were also compromised by the appearance on the scene of a highly toxic group of persons who were known as the Molly Maguires. On July 31, 1874, in Jermyn, PA, Mine Foreman Alfred L. Green was accosted by three armed men as he was returning from the barn where the mules were housed, to his residence. One of the three desperadoes was shot dead by men who came to Green's rescue.

The local media described this act of violence as "A Molly Maguire Outrage." In the following month, on August 13, 1874, another Molly Maguire outrage took place, when two supporters of a priest opposed to the Molly Maguires were killed by unknown assailants. (We will focus on the Molly Maguires in our article in the January *BLHS Bulletin*. Suffice it to say here that the presence and actions of this radical Irish group in the coal fields of northeastern Pennsylvania resulted in a terrifying reign of terror/extreme dis-harmony for more than three decades.)

**Work as Usual, the Rhythm of Supply and Demand:** In mid-February 1874, a full force of miners and laborers in the Carbondale area were working three-quarter time in the D&H mines. On February 26, 1874, the men in the D&H shops in Carbondale began working full time once again (after two months of three-quarter time). On March 2, 1874, full time was resumed in all of the D. & H. C. Co.'s mines in Carbondale, and the Lackawanna Breaker in the Carbondale yard was again preparing a thousand tons of coal daily.

On June 30, 1874, twenty men who worked in the D&H car shop in Carbondale were discharged by Thomas Orchard, foreman of the D&H car shop. In mid-June 1874, the D&H reduced by 10 percent the wages of machinists and other men in the D&H shops. Two thirds of the miners in Carbondale were out of employment during July and August 1874. The Lackawanna Breaker, at which 28,800 tons of coal were prepared for market during May 1874, was also closed down for the same period.

The volume of coal mined by the D&H in 1874 was significantly smaller than in 1873: as of July 1874, there was a falling off of 191,316 tons for the season. During July 1874, coal shipments to Honesdale over the Gravity Railroad were reduced from over 7,000 tons to 3,000 tons per day. All of the Gravity employees who were discharged on July 1, 1874, were re-hired on September 1, and Gravity shipments of coal were then increased by two or three thousand tons per day. Nearly all of the mines in the Lackawanna Valley were again in operation by the first of September 1874.

With the resumption of mining generally, a revival of trade was anticipated in the commercial operations in downtown Carbondale. All D&H Canal employees were also now back to work, as of September 1, 1874, and the canal was running to its fullest capacity. On November 1, 1874, the hours of the machinists and other employees in the Gravity shops were again cut, outside labor reduced to \$1 per day, and about three-fourths work in the mines. Hard times were again prevalent.

**Workmen's Benevolent Association:** Many of the miners in the anthracite coal fields, including many who worked for the D&H, were now members of the WBA. The harmonious and vital interaction between D&H managers and those who worked for "the Company" from 1823 on was now compromised and polluted by forces that would dominate the D&H industrial playing field for the following one hundred years.

**The Long Strike of 1875: Winter/Spring 1874-1875:** In 1874, late in the year, the wages of the contract miners were reduced by 20 percent, with 10 percent cuts for the laborers. The WBA struck, and in December 1874, the miners began what was known as "the long strike," which lasted over 5 months. In the *Carbondale Leader* of January 9, 1875, we read the following about this strike, in which the miners in the employ of the D. & H. C. Co. in the Carbondale area did not participate. "The recent reduction of ten percent in the wages of the miners will be likely to cause a great deal

of idleness in certain sections of the coal regions. It is reported that the miners in the employ of the D. & H. C. Co. in this vicinity will continue at work on the reduced wages, although there are some who object to doing so [emphasis added]. Inasmuch as the companies have fixed the rates for 1875, and as they will of course adhere to these rates, it is thought that the miners in the Lackawanna region will not undertake to strike. "

In mid-February 1875, while miners elsewhere in the coal region were on strike, the Delaware & Hudson Canal Co. gave orders to have their miners again work on "full time." In the *Carbondale Advance* of February 20, 1875, we read: "**Glorious News.** / We have the gratifying intelligence that the Delaware & Hudson Canal Co. have given orders to have their miners again work on 'full time.' This will make a big difference in their wages, and is extremely gratifying to the men and all concerned." (*Carbondale Advance*, February 20, 1875, p. 3)

In early March the coal trade was very vigorous, with the men on the Gravity Railroad working until 9 or 10 o'clock P. M., and the Jefferson Branch and the Valley Road also carrying large quantities of coal. The sixty D&H engineers, firemen and pumpmen at the mines who struck work at Providence, Olyphant and Carbondale on March 17, 1875, went back to work on March 23, at the old rate of wages. The "Long Strike" was over by July 1, 1875. The miners and laborers' Workingmen's Benevolent Association collapsed along with the strike. The collapse of the WBA in 1875 was followed by a crackdown on the terrorist group known as the Molly Maquires.

On October 2, 1875, it was announced in the *Carbondale Advance* that operations would be suspended on the Gravity Railroad for two weeks on account of the lack of room for storage at Honesdale and the dullness of the coal market. On November 1, 1875, the working hours of the men employed in the D. & H. C. Co.'s shops in Carbondale were reduced to eight hours, 7:30 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. In early January 1876, the Gravity Railroad was running at a little more than half-time, with work ending about three o'clock in the afternoon.

**Five-week Suspension: February 7—March 13, 1876:** It was reported in the *Carbondale Leader* of January 22, 1876, that the directors of the D&H had resolved to suspend work in all their mines for five weeks, commencing February 7. During the five-week suspension of work by the D&H, all the needed repairs in the mines and breakers, and on the roads were made. The *Carbondale Leader*, in its issue of January 29, 1876, took a positive stance regarding the 5-week D&H suspension, saying "We shall all get along well enough if we only put our shoulders to the wheel and work as usual."

After only two weeks of suspension, the miners employed in the Cold Brook mines (one-half of the mining population of Carbondale) were all set to work again on three-quarter time. The Lackawanna Breaker where the coal from these mines was prepared for market was the most northern one owned by the D. & H. C. Co., and the coal prepared there was shipped to market daily by the Jefferson Branch and Erie roads, and the Albany & Susquehanna Railroad to Albany and the north.

The five-week suspension ended on March 13, 1876, and by April 1, work was resumed (harmony restored) at most of the collieries of the Delaware & Hudson and Delaware, Lackawanna & Western companies.

\* \* \* \* \*